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Introduction to the special issue 'Differential Object Marking: theoretical and empirical issues'

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Introduction

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1 Background

This special issue is the outcome of a workshop on Differential Object Marking held within the symposium “Case in and across languages” organized by the Linguistic Association of Finland (Helsinki, 27–29 August 2009). The purpose of the workshop, as the title of this issue testifies to, was to discuss Differential Object Marking (DOM) from both an empirical and theoretical perspective, focusing on the description of DOM in individual languages and the parameters linked to DOM, as well as on theoretical issues regarding the relationship of DOM to other grammatical phenomena.

Differential object marking is the phenomenon whereby only a subset of direct objects are case marked depending on the semantic and/or pragmatic properties of the object referent; it has been studied in detail in the typological literature, e.g., Aissen 2003; Bossong 1985, 1998; Comrie 1979; Croft 1988; de Swart 2007; Iemmolo 2010, 2011; Malchukov and de Hoop 2008; Dalrymple and Nikolaeva 2011; and others. Properties influencing the presence of object marking usually include animacy, definiteness/identifiability, and specificity. Example (1), from Persian, illustrates the phenomenon. A definite (i.e., identifiable) direct object, as in (1a), receives overt marking, while an unidentifiable one is left unmarked:

(1) Persian (Indo-European, Indo-Iranian)

a. *Hasan ketab-râ did*

Hasan book-ACC see.3SG.PST

‘Hasan saw the book.’

- b. *Hasan ketab did*
 Hasan book see.3SG.PST
 ‘Hasan saw a book.’
 (Comrie 1989: 132)

This is an instance of “asymmetrical” DOM (de Hoop and Malchukov 2008; Iemmolo 2011), in which there is an alternation between zero and overt case marking. Another attested pattern shows a “symmetric” alternation, viz. an alternation between two (or more) symmetric case markers (de Hoop and Malchukov 2011; Iemmolo 2013). A typical example of symmetric DOM is the alternation between accusative and partitive found in Finnish, exemplified in (2). The difference in encoding signals a difference in the quantity affected by the verb action: in (2a) all the milk is gone, while in (2b) only a subpart of it is.

(2) Finnish (Uralic, Finnic)

- a. *hän jo-i maito-n*
 s/he drink-PST.3SG milk-ACC
 ‘S/he drank the milk.’
 b. *hän jo-i maito-a*
 s/he drink-PST.3SG milk-PART
 ‘S/he drank some of the milk.’
 (Kittilä 2002: 114)

Marking on the NP is not the only possibility to encode a subset of direct objects. Another possibility is to index or cross-reference the object on the verb, a strategy called Differential Object Agreement (Lazard 2005) or Differential Object Indexation (Iemmolo 2011). Bantu languages display Differential Object Indexation (DOI): in Swahili, for example, animate objects are normally indexed on the verb (3a), whereas inanimate ones are not (3b):

(3) Swahili (Niger-Congo, Bantu)

- a. *Juma a-li-m-piga risasi tembo jana usiku*
 Juma SM-PST-OM-hit bullet elephant yesterday night
 ‘Juma shot an/the elephant last night.’
 b. *risasi i-li-piga mti karibu na sisi*
 bullet SM-PST-hit tree near us
 ‘A bullet hit the tree near us’
 (Vitale 1981: 123–124)

In addition, in some languages, such as, e.g., Eastern Mansi (Virtanen this issue) and Neo-Aramaic (Coghill this issue), differential marking on the direct object NP and differential indexation of the object on the verb co-occur.

In spite of the by now vast literature on Differential Object Marking and Differential Object Indexation and the impressive amount of empirical information available on such phenomena in different languages, there is considerable debate on their functional motivations as well as on the triggering parameters of such constructions. In the literature on DOM two main approaches for the phenomenon can be singled out, a “discriminatory” and a “highlighting” or “indexing” approach (Iemmolo 2011). In the discriminatory approach, DOM, and more in general case marking, helps to correctly allocate the grammatical relations of subject and object in a transitive clause in cases of potential ambiguity due to the fact that both participants exhibit similar semantic or pragmatic properties (Comrie 1989; Bosson 1998; Malchukov and de Hoop 2008). One may understand the marking of a direct object as syntagmatically motivated in this approach. In the highlighting approach, DOM encodes salient semantic or pragmatic features of the NP referent, such as animacy and/or definiteness, affectedness (Hopper and Thompson 1980; Næss 2004), or (secondary) topicality (Dalrymple and Nikolaeva 2011). Unlike in the preceding approach, the motivation of object marking may be understood here as a paradigmatic one.

Recent years have witnessed an increasing interest in the influence of information-structural factors in determining the appearance of DOM. Although information-structural notions had been sometimes invoked to explain differential handling of direct objects, only recently have these concepts started being investigated in detail. The reason for the interest in the interaction between object marking and information structure primarily lies in the unsatisfactory explanatory power of purely semantic features, such as animacy and definiteness, for the characterization of DOM from both a language-specific and a cross-linguistic perspective. That semantic features alone do often not suffice to explain why, e.g., object marking can seemingly freely alternate with exactly the same NPs and verbs. For example, Dalrymple and Nikolaeva (2011) consider DOM as a means for marking the secondary topic status of the direct object. Iemmolo (2010, 2011) argues that Differential Object Marking is a means for marking topic discontinuities, as opposed to Differential Object Indexation, which is instead a means to mark high continuity of the direct object referent. Several of the papers contained in this special issue reflect the new attention paid to the link between information structure and DOM/DOI.

Another major theme in the literature on Differential Object Marking regards the role of verbal semantics and verb classes in determining the appearance and distribution of DOM. The importance of verbal semantics and verb classes

on object marking has been recognized in the literature (see Næss 2004; von Heusinger and Kaiser 2011; but already Pottier 1968). The importance of such factors can easily be evinced in some of the contributions to this special issue.

2 Summary of the papers

The present collection opens with a typological study. In his contribution “Differential and consistent case marking of object: A typological study” Kaius Sinnemäki focuses on the distribution of Differential Object Marking and Consistent Object Marking, i.e., cases in which all objects receive accusative marking, regardless of semantic or information-structural properties of the object referent, in a sample of 721 languages. His statistical study shows that, somehow contrary to expectations, Differential Object Marking is synchronically and diachronically preferred over Consistent Object Marking. He then provides a series of functional and formal motivations to explain his findings.

The remainder of the collection is constituted by papers which focus on the syntactic, semantic, and information-structural factors that regulate Differential Object Marking in individual languages, with particular attention to the theoretical implications of the data presented. The first five papers are concerned with asymmetric DOM systems governed by information-structural and semantic parameters of the direct object, while the last four focus upon symmetric DOM marking and the role of verbal semantics and quantification as triggering factors.

Giorgio Iemmolo and Giorgio Francesco Arcodia’s article, “Differential object marking and identifiability of the referent: A study of Mandarin Chinese,” tackles the distribution of the widely-studied *ba*-construction. In their contribution, based on a corpus study, Iemmolo and Arcodia show that analyses based on the affectedness of the object or on semantic features such as animacy only fail to account for several instances of Differential Object Marking in Mandarin Chinese. Such instances are explained by taking into consideration the role of information structure parameters, in determining the presence vs. absence of *ba*. Their corpus study shows that DOM in Mandarin Chinese serves to signal the high identifiability of the object referent in discourse, shedding light on the complex interplay between identifiability and morphosyntax in Mandarin Chinese.

Eleanor Coghill’s contribution, “Differential Object Marking in Neo-Aramaic,” deals with the morphosyntactic distribution and the triggering factors of Differential Object Marking and Differential Object Agreement in the Neo-Aramaic dialect of Telkepe. While at a first glance definiteness seems to be the main triggering factor for Differential Object Marking and Differential Object Agreement, Coghill demonstrates that the real triggering parameter for the two phenomena is the

topicality of the object. Objects in narrow focus, as well as objects with a generic reading, are consistently unmarked. She then compares her findings for Telkepe to the systems found in other North-eastern Neo-Aramaic dialects, which show either Differential Object Marking or Differential Object Agreement only, or both.

Another instantiation of Differential Object Marking is investigated by Kathrin Ann Neuburger and Elisabeth Stark in their paper “Differential object marking in Corsican: regularities, triggering factors, functions.” Neuburger and Stark provide a detailed description of the distribution of DOM in Corsican, based on a corpus of written texts. The authors show that Corsican exhibits a peculiar system of DOM, both from a Romance and crosslinguistic perspective, in so far as object marking is incompatible with nominals headed by determiners, quantifiers, and numerals. In Neuburger and Stark’s analysis, such incompatibility is due to the fact that the differential object marker in Corsican is a syntactic head that marks individuation, and cannot therefore be combined with other formal means for the expression of definiteness.

Susanna Virtanen’s article, “Pragmatic direct object marking in Eastern Mansi,” treats the interaction of Differential Object Marking and Differential Object Agreement in the topicality-based system of a Western-Siberian Uralic language. She identifies specificity as a parameter responsible for the accusative marking of a direct object, while agreement on the verb is triggered by its topical status. Topical, however, amounts to the status of secondary topic, since the primary topic is always encoded as a subject (of an active or a passive construction). The paper adds to the results of earlier studies on the morphosyntactic encoding of patients in Ob-Ugric (Skribnik 2001, Nikolaeva 1999), which pointed out the essential role of discourse pragmatics in the argument encoding of these languages.

The paper “Identifiability, givenness and zero-marked referential objects in Komi” by Gerson Klumpp straightens the definiteness parameter for a Uralic language in which an identifiable referent is not necessarily encoded as a definite expression (i.e., marked by a possessive suffix). Since accusative marking is obligatory only for definite object expressions, those which are formally not definite may be unmarked, although their referent is identifiable and referential. Cases like these have been considered as unpredicted exceptions to the rule in Komi and some other Uralic languages, but they are regular in terms of information structure: topicality, a parameter also responsible for deaccenting, unstressed pronominal or even zero encoding, may also favor the encoding of an identifiable referent as a bare noun which does not need to be object-marked. Definite encoding, however, is rather associated with focality.

The spectrum of factors analyzed in the following four papers includes not only referential properties of the direct object, but also features related to verbal semantics and quantification.

The paper “Prepositional inanimates in Dutch: a paradigmatic case of Differential Object Marking” by Peter de Swart examines an interesting pattern of alternation in object encoding in Dutch, where inanimate objects of a group of verbs of physical contact are overtly encoded as obliques, while animate ones are not. After describing the syntactic behavior of such objects, de Swart argues that the Dutch alternation represents a case of paradigmatic Differential Object Marking, which serves to encode the difference between two types of direct objects, animate and inanimate ones, with verbs of physical contact. The explanation for this pattern lies in the higher number of Proto-Patient properties of animate objects as opposed to inanimate ones.

Anne Tamm’s “Cross-categorial scalar properties explaining Differential Object Marking” challenges the established view that Finnic Differential Object Marking, i.e., the alternation between accusative and partitive, is a distinction between mass and count noun objects. The data Tamm examines are deadjectival and abstract nouns in Estonian which, unexpectedly, display the case encoding of count nouns. The account of Differential Object Marking that Tamm offers in her paper makes reference to scalarity and boundedness, as well as to the fact that boundedness and scalarity can be considered cross-categorial properties. Her findings contribute to a better understanding of the behavior of abstract nouns in Differential Object Marking systems sensitive to boundedness.

The paper “Differential object marking in Ancient Greek” by Daniel Riaño Rulilanchas examines partitive genitive direct objects in Ancient Greek as a case of Differential Object Marking. The parameters discussed are specificity and object affectedness for which the author proposes a scale. His main concern, however, is the contrast of Differential Object Marking related factors in languages with symmetrical (Ancient Greek) vs. asymmetrical case alternation (e.g., Spanish). This study offers a wealth of insights on the extension of the concept of Differential Object Marking to symmetric alternations of the type found in Ancient Greek, where verbal semantics exerts a strong influence on the encoding of direct objects.

Finally, with František Kratochvíl’s contribution, “Differential case marking in Abui”, the present special issue leaves its immediate scope, namely the differential marking of direct objects. Kratochvíl investigates differential argument marking, dealing with Differential Object Marking, differential subject marking as well as differential goal and location marking, which are realized via indexation on the verb and light verbs. Abui shows a complex system of semantic alignment, where differential argument realization is affected by referential properties of the NPs as well as by factors related to verbal semantics, such as affectedness. In addition, Kratochvíl presents an interesting account of the diachronic processes that led to the emergence of such a complex system.

3 Conclusion

In this overview of the papers in this special issue of *Linguistics*, we have sought to gather the major observations by the contributors on the distribution and the factors underlying Differential Object Marking. In our opinion, there are three main themes that run as common threads through the papers in this special issue.

First, in the majority of the articles corpus data have been utilized to identify the environments where overt accusative marking is used, can be omitted, or is ruled out. Corpus data are crucial for the investigation of Differential Object Marking, insofar as they allow for a finer-grained characterization of the phenomenon, both with regard to its syntactic distribution and its motivations.

A second major theme that unites the first group of papers regards the relevance of information-structural factors, such as topicality (Iemmolo and Arcodia; Coghill; Virtanen; Klumpp), as well as the interaction with other morphosyntactic features, such as formal definiteness (Klumpp; Neuburger and Stark).

The third thread concerns the influence of parameters related to verbal semantics, such as affectedness and boundedness (Kratochvíl; Riaño Rupilanchas; Tamm), as well as the role of verb classes (de Swart) in Differential Object Marking (especially of the symmetric type) and Differential Case Marking in general (Kratochvíl).

Summing up, the papers in this collection make it clear that, the differences notwithstanding, there are recurrent commonalities in the distribution and functions of the marking. The motivations for such commonalities are ultimately to be sought in the diachronic pathways which give rise to Differential Object Marking systems (Sinnemäki this issue; Iemmolo 2011; Bickel et al. 2012).

The articles in this issue have made important steps in broadening the empirical and theoretical bases for our understanding of Differential Object Marking, and we hope that this issue will foster further description and theoretical elaborations of Differential Object Marking.

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